



NATIONAL CONFERENCE of STATE LEGISLATURES

# Your Ideas Count!



**Questions & Answers About Representative Democracy**



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for REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY

The National Conference of State Legislatures serves the legislators and staffs of the nation's 50 states, its commonwealths and territories. NCSL is a bipartisan organization with three objectives:

- To improve the quality and effectiveness of state legislatures,
- To foster interstate communication and cooperation,
- To ensure states a strong cohesive voice in the federal system.

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# Your Ideas Count!

Questions and Answers About Representative Democracy



NATIONAL CONFERENCE of STATE LEGISLATURES

*The Forum for America's Ideas*

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## Questions and Answers About Representative Democracy

### INTRODUCTION

**de-moc-ra-cy** (dī māk'rāsē) *Government by the people; a form of government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised directly by them or by their elected agents under a free electoral system.*

—RANDOM HOUSE COLLEGE DICTIONARY

**rep-re-sent-a-tive de-moc-ra-cy:** *The system of government in which power is held by the people and exercised indirectly through elected representatives.*

—CENTER FOR CIVIC EDUCATION, WE THE PEOPLE: THE CITIZEN AND THE CONSTITUTION

Have you ever stopped to wonder how and why our system of government works?

## A Radical Idea...

About 230 years ago, when all countries were ruled by small groups of rich and powerful nobles and kings, a few courageous people in the British colonies of North America dared to assert that "all men are created equal." They strongly believed that ordinary people were born with the right to live in freedom and pursue happiness, participating in the process of making the laws that governed their lives.

This totally radical idea inspired the American colonies to break away from British rule and establish our present system of government "of, by and for the people." And because democracy, in the words of our 28th president, Woodrow Wilson, "releases the energy of every human being," Americans have been free to follow their dreams, explore new ideas, and achieve their highest goals.

"If you have a plan, we want to hear it. Tell your community leaders, your local officials, your governor, and your team in Washington. Believe me, your ideas count. An individual can make a difference."

George Herbert Walker Bush, 41st President of the United States



*"The lack of understanding about our fundamental government system is a long-term problem that is not good for the United States."*

William Pound  
Executive Director  
National Conference  
of State Legislatures

*"Representative democracy has served us well. It is still the best form of government to ensure that people's voices are heard, their interests protected and their rights safeguarded. But it cannot survive without public support and trust."*

Alan Rosenthal  
author of  
*The Decline of  
Representative  
Democracy*

## Our Government Still Works

In order to remain free to do what we want in life, we elect individuals to learn about the important issues that affect us and our families and to represent our views at local, state and national levels of government. Our representatives serve in a wide variety of offices, including school boards, city councils, state legislatures and Congress.

Anyone who meets the qualifications and who wants to make a difference in his or her community through politics may run for office. And all citizens over the age of 18 have the right to vote for whomever they choose. We call this system a "representative democracy"—where the majority makes the decisions, but the rights of the minority are protected by law.

## Democracy Requires Compromise

It sounds fairly simple, but reaching agreements in a nation as big as this one—where so many different kinds of people hold so many different points of view—is very difficult to do. It requires a lot of time, energy and patience, plus the willingness to make bargains, in order to reach agreements with all the people involved. A strong belief in the democratic process, plus the willingness to make trade-offs with each other when necessary, is what makes it possible for our legislators to work together to find ways of dealing with the many problems we face as a nation.

## What's Your Stake in Democracy?

Since debating issues and making laws can be such a long and complicated process, you may wonder why you should bother to pay attention, get involved or even vote. But just consider what would

happen to our country if the majority of the people chose not to vote. Think about what would occur if distrust of the government led many of us to turn our backs on our role in the lawmaking process instead of using our power to solve the problems we see. If this happens, you will not have a voice in the future of your country.

## Why Trust Government?

Often, misbehavior on the part of a few politicians grabs headlines, while the good that most legislators do often goes unreported. As a result, a lot of people now distrust many public officials who are actually doing their very best to serve them. But just as trust is necessary for building strong relationships with our family and friends, it is also essential for the health and success of our community, state and national relationships. So the primary purpose of this booklet is to help you understand two very important points:

- ✓ Your trust in government is key to our democracy.
- ✓ Your ideas really do count and are welcomed by your elected representatives.





# Where's My Voice?

## WHAT SOME PEOPLE THINK:

Legislators don't care what regular people think.



**How It Really Works:** Legislators are very concerned about what the people in their district want and need. Everybody's opinion is invited and welcome. But organizations that represent large numbers of people often get more attention than an individual person does.

**Have You Ever Wondered:** "How can I get my elected representatives to pay attention to my ideas and suggestions?"

**Picture This:** You and your friends are tired of the usual cafeteria food and would like some of your favorite fast food franchises to sell their meals on campus as they do at some schools in nearby cities. So you approach the school principal to let him know how many schools are now serving popular fast foods for lunch and ask if he would consider the possibility at your school.

Citing all the difficulties involved in trying to make it happen—and the many more pressing issues that are demanding his attention—

the principal turns you down without giving you the chance to speak another word. You can't help but wonder, "Where's my voice?"

That's when you decide to take your request to a friend on the student council, with the hope of enlisting support and creating a unified student 'voice' in favor of the idea.

You are surprised to learn that the council has been working on the issue and your friend is excited to hear from another student who supports the idea. They already have made some inquiries to other schools and food companies. Your friend from the council lets you know what they've found out so far and about all the unexpected obstacles they've encountered. "There's a lot more to be considered besides what we want for lunch," she explains, mentioning contracts with school employees, state standards for nutrition and a host of other considerations that had never occurred to you.

Council members invite you to join with them in trying to get parents



*"That government is the strongest of which every man feels himself a part."*

Thomas Jefferson  
3rd President of the  
United States

*"Because of their vulnerability, officeholders are extraordinarily sensitive to the opinions and demands of voters in their districts."*

Anthony King  
author of *Running Scared*



*"What I want is to get done what the people desire to have done, and the question for me is how to find that out exactly."*

Abraham Lincoln  
16th President of the  
United States

to go along with the plan. Though the outcome is far from certain, you are glad your voice is being heard and happy to participate with people who share your goal and who know how to make the system work.

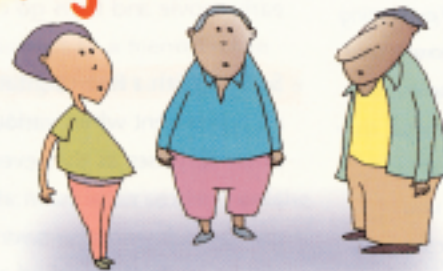
**So It Is With a Representative Democracy.** Your student council wants to hear from you and needs your support to pass the issues you care about. The same is true of members of the school board, state legislature and Congress. Your point of view is important, and so are your efforts to bring about changes you would like to see in your school, town, state and our nation.

- ✓ Legislators communicate with the people in their district in many different ways. Some send out letters. Some have local offices where people can come in to meet and talk with the legislator or his or her staff members. Most have Web pages and e-mail addresses to encourage and simplify communications with the voters.
- ✓ Very few people think about the kinds of laws they'd like to have passed. And those who do give thought to it, very rarely convey their ideas to their representatives. As a result, the best way legislators have of knowing what people care about is by checking with the interest groups that focus on the various sides of these issues.
- ✓ Despite people's accusations that lawmakers only listen to special interest groups and to the people who make big contributions to their election campaigns, every issue that comes before a legislature is discussed on its merits by people representing many different points of view.
- ✓ If a large majority of the people in a representative's district agreed about a particular issue, their representatives would probably support that issue in the legislature rather than the views of a particular special interest group. However, such agreement rarely occurs among voters.

## Don't We All Agree?

### WHAT SOME PEOPLE THINK:

The public mostly agrees on what is right so legislators should pass the laws that the people want.



**How It Really Works:** There are so many different opinions in our society and very little agreement except at a very general level. It is the job of the legislature to help find common ground among these various points of view so they can pass laws that work well and benefit the largest number of people possible.

**Have You Ever Wondered:** Why do we think there is more agreement in the legislature than there is in most families and friendships?

**Picture This:** You and your friends all decide to get together early Friday evening for some fun and you feel certain that everyone will want to see the same movie that you do. To your surprise and disappointment, not everyone in the group wants to go to the movies, and those who do want to go are all hoping to see a different movie.

One of your friends has been invited to a party and suggests that you all go there instead of to a movie. But you don't feel like being with the crowd that will be going to that party. Someone else suggests the video arcade, but that sounds boring and expensive to others in the group. Because your friends don't agree about how to spend the evening—except that you all know you want to spend it with each other—how can you work it out so that everyone feels happy and willing to go along with the ultimate decision?

*"There simply is no consensus on important political matters in the United States. Disagreement... must be embraced as a vital part of life in a modern, highly populous, differentiated, technologically complex, ethnically diverse, mobile society such as ours."*

John Hibbing  
author of *Congress as Public Enemy*



*"We need to do a better job in this country of cultivating the democratic idea that people can't always get what they want"*

Karl Kurtz

Director, NCSL Trust for Representative Democracy

*"We have become not a melting pot but a beautiful mosaic—different people, different beliefs, different yearnings, different dreams."*

Jimmy Carter

39th President of the United States

After talking about splitting into two groups, you and your friends decide to have the best of both worlds: you will go and see an early movie and then go on to the party.

**So It Is With a Representative Democracy:** It is not easy to come to an agreement when various people have differing opinions. It often surprises us that even the people who are closest to us don't always agree with us. In all relationships and group activities, there can be many right answers to some questions. So, though no one will be perfectly satisfied all of the time, our relationships grow stronger when everyone is willing to respect each other's point of view.

#### THINK ABOUT THIS:

- ✓ Surveys have shown that many people assume there is agreement on the most important issues facing the country. The truth is that there is very little agreement about what the most serious issues are and about how best to address them.
- ✓ Even experts disagree on various issues—like what is the best nutrition and diet plan, for instance.
- ✓ People may believe that there is lots of agreement in society because they're used to hanging out with people who think like they do. Being part of a close circle of friends may also encourage someone to go along with the crowd rather than hold on to their own point of view. This also makes it appear that we agree more often than we actually do.
- ✓ If we do not recognize the wide differences in beliefs and opinions that people hold, we will not understand the difficulties facing a democratic government as it tries to bring together the many views and needs coming from the many different voices of the voters.

## Whose Special Interests?

#### WHAT SOME PEOPLE THINK:

The values and interests of the average person are not represented because legislators do what special interest groups and big campaign contributors want them to do.

**How It Really Works:** Many people are members of organized interest groups, and legislators are dependent upon the good will and votes of these various groups. So Americans are actually well represented both by their interest groups and their legislators.

**Have You Ever Wondered:** If I join a group that fights for what I believe in, will I have a better chance of persuading my legislator to vote for what I want?

**Picture This:** Your after-school club wants to raise money by selling candy bars at school. You have found a supplier who will provide chocolate bars, and you determine that you need to sell 1,000 of them to raise the money you need. You go to the principal for permission, but the principal says that too many other clubs are already selling candy and denies your request.

Without selling candy, your club will never have the money it needs for the new supplies. You think it's very unfair that the principal has given other clubs permission to sell candy and feel singled-out because your club is the only one that was denied permission.



*"We have met the special interests and they are us!"*

Burdett Loomis

author of *Time, Politics and Policies: A Legislative Year*

*"When it involves other people, it's a 'special interest.' When it affects you, then it's an extremely important issue."*

State Senator Jim Costa  
California



You talk with your classmates and realize that some other clubs have been denied permission too. In fact, it seems like the principal has only allowed a few select clubs that are special favorites to sell candy. You hold a meeting after school with students from all the clubs that were denied permission. Then you go back to see the principal together. You bring letters from your parents and other community groups that are supportive of your clubs' activities. You find out that the teachers' council has been questioning the principal about the candy issue too since many of them serve as advisors to the clubs that were denied. A few teachers join your meeting with the principal.

Faced with such a large number of students and teachers who feel strongly about their need to fundraise, the principal agrees to develop a schedule for selling candy throughout the school year. Each club that wants to sell candy signs up for a one-month period. This way, only one club is selling at a time so the clubs aren't competing with each other and everyone gets to have a chance to raise some money. Your club is the first to sign up, and easily sells 1,000 candy bars.

**So It Is With a Representative Democracy:** There is power in numbers and organization. People who join with others to get their representative to pass laws they want are likely to have more influence. It is important to keep in mind that there are many people with strong views that are different from yours and they are also attempting to get laws passed. But the larger, more active and involved your group is the more attention it is likely to get from your representatives.

### THINK ABOUT THIS:

- ✓ Most of us think of our own interests as representing the public will and as the best approach for everyone. It's usually the other people's desires that we view as "special interests."
- ✓ Paid lobbyists do have a lot of influence. Although not always perfect, most of them are good and honest representatives of their organizations' beliefs and interests.
- ✓ Even though some big groups have a lot of money and can get a lot of attention, legislators also hear other points of view from smaller interest groups, executive agencies, legislative staff, the media and concerned individuals. And, as earlier stated, they must represent the majority view among the voters in their district if they hope to get re-elected.
- ✓ Because special interest groups often disagree, representatives must closely consider the policies each group supports, discuss them with other legislators, and then use their judgment when casting a vote in the legislature.

*"I understand a faction [or 'special interest'] to be a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or a minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion or of interest. The ... causes of faction are sown in the nature of man."*

James Madison

4th President of the United States





# Why Compromise?

## WHAT SOME PEOPLE THINK:

The lawmaking process doesn't work well because of politics and needless conflict.

**How It Really Works:** The democratic process often involves a lot of argument as legislators attempt to find common ground and areas of agreement for the different values, interests and needs of the many voters they each represent. Sometimes these differences are hotly debated for long periods of time, but most are settled through compromise.

**Have You Ever Wondered:** How do legislators ever get any laws passed when each one of them must deal with the different demands of so many various groups of people?

**Picture This:** Suppose your parents set your curfew at 10 p.m. on weekdays. However, on this particular Thursday night, your favorite band is going to be playing in a nearby club. Everyone will be there. But if you attend, you won't get back till 11:30 p.m.

All your friends' parents have agreed to let them go. Your parents are the only holdouts, and you're feeling angry and embarrassed.

You know you're going to have to fight hard for what you want, but the issue feels important and worth it to you. And because the bond you share with your parents is very strong—and you maintain a respectful attitude throughout the argument—you are confident your relationship will easily withstand the conflict no matter what the outcome.

**At last a deal is worked out:** Your parents will let you attend the concert *IF* you do all your homework for the week in advance; *IF* your college-age sister and her boyfriend go with you; and *IF* you all come home immediately afterwards. This seems fair to you—as long as the older couple doesn't sit too close to you and your friends. Everyone agrees.

**So It Is With a Representative Democracy:** Our country is strengthened by the many different kinds of people within it. But this also means that you can't always get your way because others have different desires and goals than yours. It is important to build relationships of trust in order to work out differing points of view.

- ✓ The U.S. Constitution resulted from a number of compromises.
- ✓ Conflict is a natural part of a democracy because differences of opinion exist between the needs and views of different groups, districts, parties and legislative houses, as well as different branches of government.
- ✓ In reality, it takes time to come to an agreement and it is often a difficult, unpleasant process. Legislators discuss differing views on a problem, attempt to reach solutions, and review and alter them until they finally agree.
- ✓ Debate, negotiation and compromise are essential for arriving at a common ground that represents the opinions and interests of as many people as possible. This is what representative democracy is all about.

*"Compromise does not mean cowardice."*

John Fitzgerald Kennedy  
35th President of the  
United States.

*"I am a compromiser and maneuverer. I try to get something. That's the way our system works."*

Lyndon Baines Johnson  
36th President of the  
United States.



*"The slow and deliberate process of debate and give-and-take, done face-to-face by representatives from different areas and disparate constituencies, allows all perspectives and interests to be weighed."*

Norman Ornstein  
American Enterprise System



# Your Ideas Count!

"Liberty cannot be preserved without a general knowledge among the people, who have a right ... and a desire to know."

John Adams  
2nd President of the  
United States

"Every government degenerates when trusted to the rulers of the people alone. The people themselves are its only safe depositories."

Thomas Jefferson  
3rd President of the  
United States

For our representative democracy to succeed in solving the problems we face—while preserving our personal freedoms—we must each participate as fully as we possibly can. Even you, who have the biggest stake in the future but may not yet be eligible to vote, can have a role in deciding what our future will look like.

If you want to make a positive difference in the world and be someone to whom others listen, you need to educate yourself and then join with groups that share your interests. By working together with these like-minded people and staying in close touch with your elected representative, you can strive today to help create the kind of world you want to live in tomorrow.

Your voice counts. Your ideas are welcome and they matter. But the process of reaching agreements and passing laws in our system of government takes time. It also requires patience, tolerance for differences and disagreements, plus the willingness to compromise—because you may not win if the majority does not agree with you. Once you understand how the democratic process works and how to get your voice heard, then you have a chance to make a real difference in the world—for yourself and countless others.

## Your Voice Matters:

People often stop themselves from speaking up about things that matter to them because they think no one will listen or care. However, if something is important to you, it is probably important to other people as well. So the next time you see something around you that could be improved, talk to someone who can help. You may want to do some research first to make a clear case for your beliefs. But once you present the facts, you may be surprised to find out how much your voice really does count.

## Go Ahead. Try This At Home.

✓ Find out the name of your local state legislators. (Note: Most states have two houses of government, so you will likely have two representatives. You can find your representatives by going to the NCSL Web site at [www.ncsl.org](http://www.ncsl.org).) Learn as much as you can about your legislators: political party, background, and the issues he or she cares most about.

✓ Check out the issues that are being debated in your state capitol. What are the really hot issues and what are the differing viewpoints? What are the possible compromises?

✓ For a short period of time, say a month or so, check your local newspapers and the Internet to learn more about issues affecting your community. Talk about them with your parents. When you feel strongly about an issue, let your opinion be known. Write or call your legislator and share your point of view. Remember, your opinion counts.

✓ Make a list of other Web sites that can make your ideas count in our representative democracy.

## Your Ideas Count!



"Civility is the determined choice of trust over cynicism, of community over chaos."

George W. Bush  
43rd President  
of the United States





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